A Joint Vision for Civil Society in Greater Essex

Essex Community Foundation

Introduction

Created by Essex Community Foundation (ECF) in partnership with the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE)(1)

This vision sets out how the voluntary sector, local government, public services, health providers and other partners can work together to create a trusted and thriving civil society across Greater Essex (2) in the years to come.

This vision serves as a practical tool and an invitation for change.

Essex is facing significant structural transformation driven by Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution, alongside the implementation of the NHS 10-Year Plan, changes to Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), and the rollout of the Civil Society Covenant. These developments create both pressures and opportunities for communities. Rising demand, increasing costs, and evolving public systems place new strains on services, but they also offer a chance to reimagine how support is designed and delivered.

In the context of these structural transformations, a strong civil society provides continuity, flexibility, and deep-rooted community responses, enabling public sector partners to prioritise their statutory obligations. This vision sets out how the voluntary sector, local government, public services, health providers and other partners can work together to create a trusted and thriving civil society across Essex in the years to come.

Our Sector

Our sector's social value goes beyond monetary measures.

We play key roles in social care, health, skills, arts and culture, environment, and community cohesion. We strengthen communities, build trust, and foster social connections that make Essex a more resilient and prosperous place to live. Our sector reaches marginalised and underrepresented groups, supporting their voices to shape practical solutions that meet real needs.

Investing in a robust civil society is an investment in Essex's economy and social infrastructure.

We call for increased recognition of our sector, genuine partnership in the design and delivery of services, and sustained long-term investment in local communities. These commitments will be a challenge; however, they are vital to building a strong and thriving civil society in Greater Essex.

Our sector's economic value is significant.

The sector is a major economic engine across Essex, generating over £1.2 billion in economic activity each year, sustaining jobs of 17,500 staff and 95,000 volunteers. This workforce produces £4.2 billion in real value in Essex – a return of £3.50 for every £1 invested – while delivering services that otherwise might fall to the public sector or remain unmet (3)The sector is essential to economic stability.

What We Envision for Greater Essex

Recognition

Recognition of the vital role the voluntary sector plays in our communities.

Genuine Partnership

Genuine Partnership to plan and deliver community-led strategies.

Investment

Investment in the voluntary sector and our communities.

1. Recognition

The Government has recognised the critical contribution of our sector through the Civil Society Covenant (4), committing to charity independence and encouraging us to play a leading role in empowering communities and delivering public services. It sets out a vision where our sector's voice is heard in decision-making and where everyone's contribution is valued.

What Our Sector Offers

- Connection between local government, health systems, businesses, and funders to the communities they serve while inspiring philanthropic giving and strengthening the local impact
- Unmatched community insight, place-based knowledge, and lived experience which ensures that the voices of marginalised people are heard, outcomes have real impact, and solutions reflect local realities.

What Our Sector Needs

- Recognition of the VCSE sector as a full and equal partner, including engagement at a strategic level in planning and decision-making, alongside the public and private sectors.
- Acknowledgment of the vital, often overlooked social and economic contribution of the voluntary and community sector in Essex.

2. Genuine Partnership

In a thriving system, services are delivered in a coordinated way that transforms community outcomes. Expertise and resources are aligned across public bodies and our sector, enabling services to better identify gaps in provision and meet community needs more effectively. Shared learning is central, with insights, evidence, and best practices made accessible and easily replicable to drive continuous improvement.

What Our Sector Offers

- Expertise in shaping priorities and budgets alongside public bodies, making services more effective, targeted, and sustainable.
- Trusted partnerships that strengthen coordination and deliver fair, efficient solutions.
- Long term solutions that work and improve the quality of life for local communities.

What Our Sector Needs

- Formal mechanisms for co-design, joint commissioning, and consultation informed by local community insight to shape policy and service delivery.
- Stronger relationships and trust across sectors, enabling shared priorities and reducing siloed working.
- Shared infrastructure and coordinated delivery and reporting mechanisms, through networks, data-sharing partnerships, and integrated services.

3. Investment

We are at a pivotal moment: national debates on prevention, social infrastructure, and system reform create a real opportunity to rethink how we invest in civil society. Our sector must move beyond reactive, short-term approaches toward resilient, insight driven investment in communities. Evidence shows that community-led prevention consistently returns £3–£7 for every £1 invested. Such investment eases pressure on public services and enables organisations to plan, innovate, and deliver systemic change rather than merely short-term outputs (5)

What Our Sector Offers

- Passion, care, and lasting commitment to our communities, without a profit motive.
- A focus on frontline prevention and early intervention.
- First-hand research, relationships, and community insights to help develop lasting, locally driven solutions.

What Our Sector Needs

- Multi-year, place-based funding that builds organisational stability and enables long-term planning and innovation.
- Long-term, flexible, and community-led funding rooted in care, belonging, and shared accountability.
- Investment in knowledge, capacity building, and leadership in our sector.
- The ability to influence and inform where and how investment is made.

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Who we are

Essex Community Foundation

Essex Community Foundation is the largest independent funder of civil society in Essex. With £56 million of endowed resources, we are deeply rooted in the impact economy, connecting philanthropists, private sector, and public sector bodies with voluntary and community groups to effect change. **Our 2030 Strategy**, designed with our partners, sets a clear ambition for us to leverage new investment, support more charities, and be a bold and independent voice for civil society in Essex.

The VCSE in Greater Essex is large and diverse, with 5,000 registered charities, 68% of which have an annual income of less than £50,000 per annum. These small, grassroots organisations work alongside larger Essex charities, of which only 3% have an income over £1 million(6).

This vision has been created in partnership with leaders representing civil society organisations across Greater Essex.

You can learn more about Essex Community Foundation here

What comes next?

To make a real and lasting difference, we must work together to implement this vision in a way that delivers meaningful behavioural and cultural change across the system. Supporters are invited to reflect on their role and identify tangible actions they can take to realise this vision.

This is an open invitation to forge a genuine, long-term partnership with the sector, one built on trust, shared insight, and a common vision for every community in Greater Essex. We stand ready to find solutions, share resources, and turn actions into real outcomes for the people we collectively serve. Get in touch so together we can shape services that are effective, sustainable, and firmly grounded in community needs.

Please get in touch at: policy@essexcf.org.uk

About This Document

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This vision, led by Essex Community Foundation, was developed through a collaborative and evidence-informed process. It draws on one-to-one conversations, network discussions and cross-sector engagement with a wide range of civil society organisations across Essex, alongside public sector partners, including local government and health.

The vision was drafted by Essex Community Foundation, shared with key stakeholders for feedback, and refined to reflect their input. Its development was informed by Essex-wide research, relevant national evidence and established data sources, including government research on the social value of civil society interventions. Together, these insights shaped the themes, priorities and rationale set out in this vision.

Endorsement Signatories

The following organisations and individuals have formally endorsed 'A Joint Vision for Civil Society in Greater Essex':

Organisations

- 3food4u
- Action for Family Carers
- African Families in the UK (AFIUK)
- Baby Basics Billericay
- Basildon Borough Council
- Brighter Opportunities for Special People (BOSP)
- Braintree Area Foodbank
- Castle Point Association for Voluntary Services
- Castle Point Borough Council
- Chelmsford City Council
- CHESS Homeless
- Colchester City Council
- Community Voluntary Services Tendring (CVST)
- Community360
- Diocese of Chelmsford
- Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services (ECVYS)
- Essex Association of Local Councils
- Essex Boys and Girls Clubs
- Essex Carers Network CIC
- Essex Carers Support
- Essex Police
- Essex Sight (Essex Blind Charity)
- Essex Wildlife Trust
- Headway Essex
- Healthwatch Essex (Southend)
- Home-Start Essex
- Ideas Hub Chelmsford
- Maldon & District CVS
- Micro Rainbow CIC
- My OTAS (My Own Time and Space)
- Next Chapter
- NHS Mid and South Essex ICB
- Open Road Visions
- Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner for Essex
- Rainbow Services (Harlow)
- Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Action (RAMA)
- Renew Counselling
- RRAVS - Rayleigh Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service
- Specialist Rape and Sexual Abuse Services (SERICC)
- SNAP Charity
- The Enterprise East Group CIC
- Trust Links
- Uttlesford Community Action Network (UCAN)
- UTurn4Support

Individuals

- Nick Eveleigh, CEO of Chelmsford City Council

References

1. When "the sector" or "our sector" is mentioned, it refers to the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE). We believe our sector acts as the foundation of a thriving civil society.
2. When we mention Greater Essex, we are referring to the entire county, encompassing Essex, Southend-on-Sea, and Thurrock.
3. Tony Chapman, *The Structure, Dynamics and Impact of the Third Sector in Essex* (report commissioned by Essex Community Foundation, Durham University, November 2023).
4. Civil Society Covenant, October 2025, **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-covenant/civil-society-covenant**.
5. The Government's Rapid Evidence Assessment of Valuation Methods for Civil Society (2023) found that across 23 UK studies, community-based and preventative VCSE interventions consistently generated positive social returns, with ratios in the region of £3–£7 of value for every £1 invested.
6. Chapman, Tony. *The Structure, Dynamics and Impact of the Third Sector in Essex.* Report commissioned by Essex Community Foundation. Durham University, November 2023.

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